

## One World Into Another

BY JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK AND CATHERINE BORG

When I was only eleven years old, I told my mother that I didn't want her to be my mom anymore. But this decision didn't come with the telling; it came earlier, the very moment I asked my Aunt Emmeline if I could join her Crinoline Club.

That winter, Auntie asked me to come along with Uncle Jay on their annual pilgrimage to The Point, a big deal. Ever since Dad had split for New Mexico with the woman who would become his new wife, Mom didn't let me do much of anything other than homework and soccer practice. We hardly went anywhere

other than the practice fields; most days, the two of us just rattled 'round the house, breathing but barely alive. At school, I was the quiet type and so didn't have any real friends. At home, I kept my head down, trying to avoid my mom's simmering fury. So when Auntie Emmeline called me up and invited me, I was thrilled, even though I wasn't quite sure what a "pilgrimage" was and didn't have any idea where The Point might be.

For as long as I'd been alive, Mom and her sister had never seen eye-to-eye on anything—politics, religion, marriage, education, or how I should be raised, especially now

that there "wasn't a man in the house anymore," as I'd heard Auntie say. Mom never missed an opportunity to tell me that my aunt was a "nutcase" or "brainwashed" or a "childless vulture," but in my own experience, Auntie had always been nice to me and had never forgotten my birthday, like my dad had for the past three years that he'd been gone.

So even though I knew Mom wouldn't want me to go, I begged and begged. I pulled out every childhood stop, telling her I'd load the dishwasher from now on and would put away my clean clothes every week and wouldn't play my stereo so loud anymore. In relenting, Mom said, "Just don't believe everything you hear," pressing her lips together so hard they turned white.

Auntie and Uncle Jay picked me up on a bitter January morning, the sky blue but with a bite. In one fell swoop, we drove all the way from Roanoke, Virginia to St. Mary's County, Maryland, getting lost just once but finding a nice old guy, wrinkled as a raisin, who worked at a sleepy gas station and gave us long sticks of beef jerky before steering us back to the right road.

When we finally arrived at our motel, it was dark; the wind breathed ice down our necks as we unloaded the car. I asked how close we were to The Point, and Uncle Jay said we were still half an hour from our final destination—a place he referred to as The Park. This confused me, but I said nothing. And

even though the motel was colder than I'd hoped, after a greasy fast-food supper that Mom would've never let me eat, I wrapped up in a blanket and kept warm enough. It seemed like life was finally happening to me.

The next morning, very early my uncle left to set up camp with his friends, a gang he called Lee's Miserables—middle-aged men who were lean and sour-smelling, dressed in handmade jackets and pants cut from the same raincloud gray. They looked like the old-timey soldiers pressed into tin squares I'd once seen framed above my uncle's desk; back when Dad was still around, and we'd go to visit them now and then.

Auntie told Uncle Jay that she'd stay behind to get dressed at the motel, and that she was going to let me watch—and help.

"About time she learned," he said. "With your sister a Lincoln lover."

Uncle Jay glanced at me, but I just raised my eyebrows and kept quiet. Of course I'd learned all about Abe Lincoln and how he'd saved the slaves, but I'd never heard Mom say one thing about him, much less something gushy.

After my uncle left and Auntie had finished braiding her hair into a complicated bun, I told myself that I wasn't here just to watch but to learn. So I took a deep breath and asked, "What's a Lincoln lover?" I thought my voice sounded too high, almost like a squeak.

For a moment, the question seemed to grip Auntie's face, but then she smiled wide and said, "You'll see—you'll see. Old Abe wasn't all he's cracked up to be." Crinkling up her eyes, she added, "Now, Kitty, are you ready to help me get into these things?"

My heartbeat practically vibrated the air; I was ready.

She started pulling strange-looking clothes out of her suitcase. First, she slid on a chemise she said she'd spent the whole bloody month of November embroidering; I thought it was beautiful, like a princess nightgown. Snowflake white, it fell to just above her knees.

Then she pulled on a pair of matching "drawers," as she called them, laughing and holding them up for me to see. "Old-fashioned underwear," she explained. They looked like a gauzy pair of pants and had a slit between the legs.

"What's the gap for?" I asked, my face flushing. "Did you forget to sew it?"

"Oh, no," said Auntie, giving me an exaggerated wink. "It's in case I have to make room for tea."

I couldn't really believe that she was planning to stuff tea bags into her underwear, but I knew I'd rather die than say I didn't get the joke. So instead I smiled sideways and gave her my full attention.

"Now," Auntie said, "you can help me squeeze into this blasted corset."

She put on a kind of sleeveless

top over her chemise, one with old buttons in the front and something like shoelace strings at the back. I'd once heard Mom say that my Uncle Jay was "disgusting as well as dumb" because he soaked the brass buttons for his "stupid" soldier jackets in little urine-filled bowls to turn them antique. "At least you can smell him coming," she had added. I couldn't help but wonder whether the buttons on Auntie's corset were just regular-old or pee-old, but I didn't ask.

Reaching her arms around to the rib-laces, Auntie threaded them as best she could, and then she asked me to pull them up and tight and to give everything a good tug.

"I don't want to be a loose woman," she said, laughing her bright laugh.

After that, she stepped into what looked like a big metal birdcage and tied over it a thick, black skirt I knew she'd quilted herself ("for extra warmth," she explained).

"We're almost done," she said, then asked me to help her shimmy into a pretty violet dress, hand-stitched with black ribbons, which we slid down over everything else like a plastic bag around a circle of bread.

She was ready. Auntie told me to step back to take a long, good look.

My eyes filled with her. She looked ready to walk right into the past.

Auntie added black ankle boots, a quilted hood, and a homemade muff to her lavish dress. My stone-washed jeans and



store-bought sweater just compare; I wanted the life was conjuring, not the one

Before we left the road head to The Park—wherever was—I reached for Auntie's and wrapped my fingers around. Despite the chilly room, he was warm. And even though heart stuttered and I knew that Mom would hate it, I let Auntie square in the face and "Can I be a part of your Cri Club?"

My aunt's eyes seemed scratch flame. "It's the Crinc Brigade," she said, "and all you need to join is blood."

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It turned out I had the blood. His name had been George Stuart of Bonsack, Virginia Confederate private in Burro Battalion. He fought during the Aunt Emmeline called the "War Between the States," adding that he died "in the hands of the enemy." George had been a prisoner of war down at the Point Lookout Prison Camp, he was the blood relative I needed—the blood that Auntie I already had moving through my veins.

I learned all of this as she drove us from the motel and down to The Park, the sky dissolving into hard gray that promised snow. We would meet up with Uncle John and other Miserables, and more of

Crinolines.

"What's The Park?" I asked, finally getting up my nerve. "Is there a playground? A football field? And why is a park also a point?"

Auntie laughed again, and I tried to remember the last time I'd heard Mom laugh so much. I couldn't.

"Oh no, no. It's a memorial park. It sits on a skinny little piece of land called Point Lookout, where the Chesapeake meets the Potomac. Your uncle gave money to build The Park, you see, and us Crinolines help to maintain it. To keep it nice."

Auntie went on to explain that, years and years ago, she'd searched out all the necessary documents: George F. Stuart's army reference slip, his marriage certificate, the record of his early death at the Confederate prison. "Probably from starvation," she said, "but that's not official. The guards said he caught the breakbone fever." George had been my grandma's great-great uncle, a relative Mom had never mentioned. Auntie said she believed his eyes must've been green like her own, not brown like Mom's or mine.

"Green as a gooseberry," she said, her whole face smiling. "Poor old George with his goosey-green eyes—he was my ticket."

Without him, Auntie would've been rejected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy or UDC, the proper name of her Crinoline Brigade.

"Back in 1876, it was the

UDC that raised the money to put up the first monument down at the Point's Confederate cemetery," she said. "White marble—very nice, very elegant. And even though by then the feds had moved all the prisoners' bodies and dumped them all together—well, us Daughters have kept that grave green for over almost a hundred and fifty years!"

She sounded so happy, but then her voice changed from honey to tinfoil. "Not exactly the way our government should honor those who died in captivity serving our country," she said, "but what can you do."

I glanced over at my aunt. She was a strange sight, with all her bows and big skirt bunched behind the steering wheel, her face now closed like a curtain twitched tight. So because I assumed I should keep tight too, Auntie and I spent the rest of the drive in silence.

We passed new-built houses next to broken-down trailers, small farms that kept horses or goats, a couple of schools, a whitewashed church, an ancient gas station with a homemade sign that read "Welcome Descendants & Friends!!," and lots and lots of tangled forest, all under bits of leaded sky. My vision narrowed to the winding road in front of me, and I could feel the blue of want—a wish to arrive, to see more clearly.

When we finally got close to The Park, we passed a plot that Auntie said was a cemetery.

"There's the Daughter's

original memorial," she said, slowing down and pointing through the windshield, "to the left of that really big one the feds put up." I saw a marble white arrow aiming at the sky, pale against the gray trees. "There were fifty thousand Johnny Rebs who suffered here," she said, "and the official count says almost four thousand died and are buried right there in that plot." Leaning her face a little closer to my side of the car, she added, "More like fourteen thousand. Feds got their math wrong."

There weren't any headstones, just that marble arrow and then a mammoth stone shaft my aunt said had been put up in 1911 to replace the Daughter's memorial. The place didn't seem like a graveyard at all, but still, I let the moment take me. I bowed my head—imagining all the bodies of those faraway men stacked on top of each other like logs tossed in a hole.

A moment later, Auntie said, "We're here," and she pulled into a packed parking lot. Looking up, all I could see were flags—so many flags—arranged in the shape of an eye, with a statue of a bronze soldier standing at the pupil. I'd never seen any of these flags before. No stars and stripes. Not even the Maryland state flag, which I'd learned about in school, along with Virginia's and the other forty-eight.

On the tallest staff above the statue flapped the biggest of them all: a flag with an ocean-blue cross set against a shrill red background, with

little white stars stitched inside the cross's lines.

Auntie saw me looking up. "Some say our flag's a disgrace." Then she dropped her voice and added, "Your mom's even said so."

I turned to her, and she was nodding her braided head like a teacher telling you what you most need to know. "We got the money up to build this whole memorial because the feds banned us from flying our ancestors' battle flag over their remains. They told us that letting the Daughters put the flag up at the cemetery long ago had been a mistake." She breathed deep. "Your mom thinks it's hateful."

Her words seemed to corrode my heart. "Why?" I asked. "Why's it bad?" All I knew of flags was how proud people usually felt about them.

My aunt's goosey-green eyes filled with a sad beauty. "It's not," she said, smiling but now in a softer way. "It stands for our Southern heritage. We fought for freedom—George fought for freedom—from Abe Lincoln and the Billy Yanks who wanted to force us to live like them. But George decided he'd rather starve in prison than go against what he believed in."

Then Auntie tapped a finger on my chest. "And I think you're as strong as he was." No one had ever called me strong before, and my eyes stung.

"Okay," she said, rustling her skirts, "now you've gotta come around and help me out of the dang

car!"

As I stepped out, the snow I'd known was coming started to fall—not serious, but noticeable, tinting the air a hazy blue. It didn't make me feel cold, though. I felt glad. Like the snow had somehow started just for me.

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That day, my uncle and the rest of Lee's Miserables put on a re-enactment that moved me, sinew and soul.

The group's performance gave a pretty good idea of what George's last few months must've been like. Ragged, some barefoot, with purple lips and hunched shoulders, the men sculpted themselves into the shape of long-ago—crowded in tents, stirring a mud-colored stew, shucking oysters with big knives, and singing some old song about Maryland and bursting a tyrant's chain. Despite the biting cold, the Crinolines and all the other members of the Miserables' families watched their doings like it was the best play they'd ever seen.

The re-enactment was then followed by a speaker—a professor type with a wide-brimmed hat and tiny glasses who clutched both sides of the podium with his gloved hands and said we were gathered “to present and remember truthful history and to do justice to the South.”

After that, a few of the descendants got up to read poems they'd written about their imprisoned

relatives, their breath puffing out like small ghosts, and then everyone sang a couple more songs, “Dixieland” and the “Bonnie Blue Flag,” both of which Auntie knew by heart. And although I was colder than I could ever remember being, I stomped my feet and hummed along with what I could, warming to the sound of all those voices vibrating against the leafless trees.

The end of the music felt like the end of the program, with people clapping and nodding at each other. And although I was elated, I was also overwhelmed and very tired, with a body that had gone almost completely arctic. I was ready to head back for another fast-food dinner at our warmish hotel and to hear Auntie and Uncle Jay talk over everything that had just happened.

But then it was my very own uncle who walked up to the podium and turned to face the crowd. Auntie whispered, “Your Uncle Jay was asked special to speak on behalf of the Miserables today.”

In his pewter-colored uniform and musty hat rimmed with snowflakes, my uncle stood tall, looking at some distant spot before starting his speech.

“I stand before you today as a living historian,” he began. “We may be cold—maybe we're wishing for a hot shower or a hot meal or all of the other creature comforts we usually have. But with our ladies dressed in their Sunday best and with our children and grandchildren here

with us today, us Miserables are a lot better off than our relatives who had to die here.”

Uncle Jay stared at the salt-cold sky once again, spreading his hands wide as if reaching for everything around him. I'd never seen him act like this before; it was almost as if he'd become another person.

“Those men had nothing but tents to live in through the freezing snow and the blistering sun. They had nothing but hardtack and spoiled soup to eat—or maybe a rat, if they were lucky. The men who died here got sick a lot. They got TB, the breakbone fever, smallpox, and scurvy. They starved to death. They came in strong and brave and died like walking skeletons, some of them starved so bad they died under a hundred pounds. If the prisoners tried to escape, they were shot like sides of beef by the Union scum who'd captured them. And some of those scum had once served the prisoners and their families before they ran off to help old Lincoln with his plans to set them free and invade the South.”

At that, my uncle brought his hands in close to his chest as if to pray, but instead, he clenched them, knuckle to knuckle. “And so, we descendants who're here today don't complain. We can't feel bad for ourselves. No, we can't. Our duty means more than just being cold. This brings us a little bit closer to what our ancestors had to endure,

and we're grateful for their sacrifice. Standing right here in this snow to honor them is a privilege. We members of Lee's Miserables owe them so much.”

Then there was a beat, an Uncle Jay bowed his head. The crowd broke into a loud applause, and I clapped my own hands raw.

Along my bones, I could feel the quick pulse of George's blood. My toes and cheeks ached with frost. I now knew that George's situation had been so much worse. On top of his daily misery, he'd had to carry the weight of fear—that he would die that he'd never see his family again.

And then I thought that I'd been a real peach, and my real family. Auntie Emmelin and Uncle Jay. The Miserables and the Crinolines. And a glow of belonging bloomed in my chest.

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The pilgrimage over, we came back to Roanoke. Auntie Emmelin I'd been a real peach, and Uncle Jay added that they'd take me again next year. They'd even help me apply to become a true Dixie Daughter, if I liked, when I turn sixteen, and Auntie said she'd show me how to sew a chemise.

Over our many hours in the car, I asked a lot of questions about George and the prisoners and the war he'd fought in, and both Auntie and Uncle Jay talked to me like a grown-up, answering everyth-

It was the first time I felt like I fit together with other people—fit just right, like the insides of a clock.

“We’ll have to ask your mom, though,” Auntie said quietly, as if talking to herself.

“Do we?” Uncle Jay asked, though he made it sound like a joke.

Before I could think myself out of it, I said, “I can ask her.”

Auntie and Uncle Jay both looked surprised, but then they grinned and nodded.

As soon as I stepped into the house and started taking off my coat, though, Mom was right there in front of me, and I felt a swoop of doubt along my breastbone.

“Well,” she asked, “how was it?” She was giving me her hardest look.

I said, “It was great,” putting emphasis on the “great” part, even though I wasn’t looking her in the face.

“Great?” Mom said. “Great? Really?” Her voice felt sharp as a slap. “You hung out with a bunch of grown men and women pretending to live the Civil War all over again, acting like victims—like their relatives didn’t lose the damn war.” I lifted my eyes and watched her make herself angry, as she so often did. “Lost Cause my ass,” she said with a hiss. “It’s just disgusting.”

My heart tight in my mouth, I said, “You don’t understand.”

“I understand all right,” Mom said. She pointed to a kitchen chair. “Sit down.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I said, trying to make my voice cut like a knife, though I knew I’d do as she asked. But when I sat, I tried to be as tall and straight as possible, as if I’d decided to do it myself.

Mom stood in front of me, hands on hips. Her lecture pose. “Did my sister and her husband happen to tell you that their cherished dead prisoners were locked up because they were fighting to keep Black people enslaved?”

I looked at the floor and said nothing. I didn’t believe her. No one at the re-enactment had said anything about slaves.

“It’s not the ‘War between the States,’ Kitty, if that’s what Emmy told you. It’s the goddamn Civil War.” Mom’s face closed like a fist. It was the same whenever something having to do with Dad came up. “The Civil War that happened because Abraham Lincoln—I know you’ve learned about him—emancipated the slaves, gave them freedom. He thought slaves should be treated like, you know, human beings, not a thing to be bought and sold. And that great-great-great Uncle George or whatever—he fought on the side that wanted to keep Black people in chains.”

“You knew about George?” I asked. My pulse quickened.

“George? George? Do I know about George?” Mom’s eyes were fierce, and now her hands started carving the air. “George, the son of a slaveowner. George, the guy

who probably helped his dad lynch runaways or who probably raped Black girls no older than you.” Her words were sharp, meant to wound. “Yes,” she said, “I know who George F. Stuart is. Yes, I do. He’s the shame I live with every day.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, still looking at my feet but feeling for the words that wanted saying. “I’m not ashamed.”

Mom had taken away the life I’d had with her and Dad—our impromptu dance parties when I first got my stereo, our long bike rides to nowhere, our double-dip ice cream cones in summer, and occasional burgers and fries in winter, eaten hot and right in the car. She didn’t want me to sleep over at someone else’s house—not even with the soccer team—and she’d tried to make me feel like my aunt wasn’t my friend. I wasn’t going to let her ruin this for me.

“Auntie’s not ashamed either,” I said. “So if you’re ashamed of George, then you’re ashamed of me.” I paused for maximum effect. “Not like I haven’t always known that.”

Mom grew still, though her eyes kept blazing.

“You’re ashamed because you don’t have anything to be proud of,” I said. It felt wild to speak this way, but also good. “Dad left you. You don’t have someone like Uncle Jay the way Auntie does.” I knew this last bit would hurt, but I didn’t care.

“You don’t even know the real history of things,” I continued.

“The way George perished in prison just because he stood up for what he believed in. How he fought against the Northern invaders who wanted to take away everything he cared about.”

Then I took in a big breath and let it all out in a rush before standing up from the chair and making myself look her right in the eyes.

“You don’t know anything,” I said, telling myself not to look down, to keep my gaze steady, “and I wish Auntie was my mom. She’s good to me and listens and laughs and gives me things and wants to hear my opinion and teaches me stuff. I told her I want to become a Daughter of the United Confederacy just like she is, and she’s going to help me do it. So I guess when that happens, I’ll be her daughter for real.”

I paused, feeling something rising in me like water. “I can’t wait to call her my mom.”

Around the two of us, the room got really quiet, as if the air was swallowing sound.

Finally, Mom said, almost in a whisper, “I know my sister’s a fanatic.” I could see that her anger was unwinding into tears, something she usually tried to avoid. “And I know you’re too young to get that.”

Then Mom left the room, and since I didn’t know what to do, especially with my lungs heaving and my head reeling, I lugged my suitcase up to my room and went to bed.

§

That night as I lay in my bed, looking at the ceiling and listening for any sign that my mother was still awake, I thought about the place that my aunt and uncle had taken me after Uncle Jay's speech and before we went back to the motel. The memorial is virtually on top of Point Lookout, and my uncle said he'd let his fellow Miserables pack up, without him because I should really see land's end before it got dark.

"Nothing like it," my uncle had said. "Like you could step from one world into another."

So we three drove down to The Point, my uncle's bitter smell mixing with the feeble warmth pumped out by the heater. And when we climbed out of the car to walk towards the earth's edge, I saw that the snow had stopped and the sky had turned into a hard, enamel blue, a color that sometimes comes on before twilight.

Breathing in that sharp air and eyeing the thin indigo line where the sea met the sky, I tried to imagine—really imagine—what it would have been like to be George, who'd died just a mile away. To smell his salt sweat. To feel his hunger. To know a cold that couldn't be shaken.

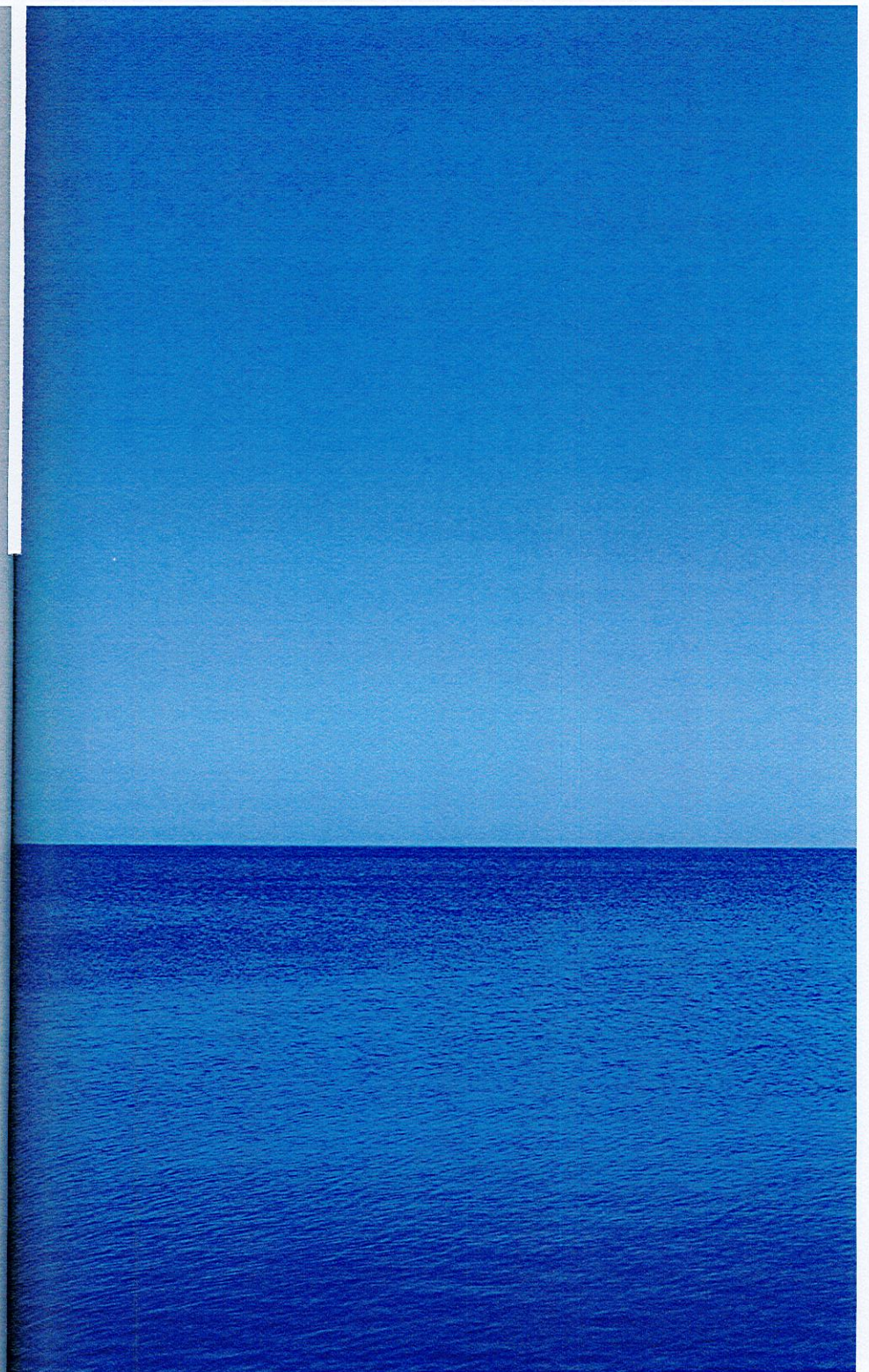
And to hear the beat of his blood in my ears.

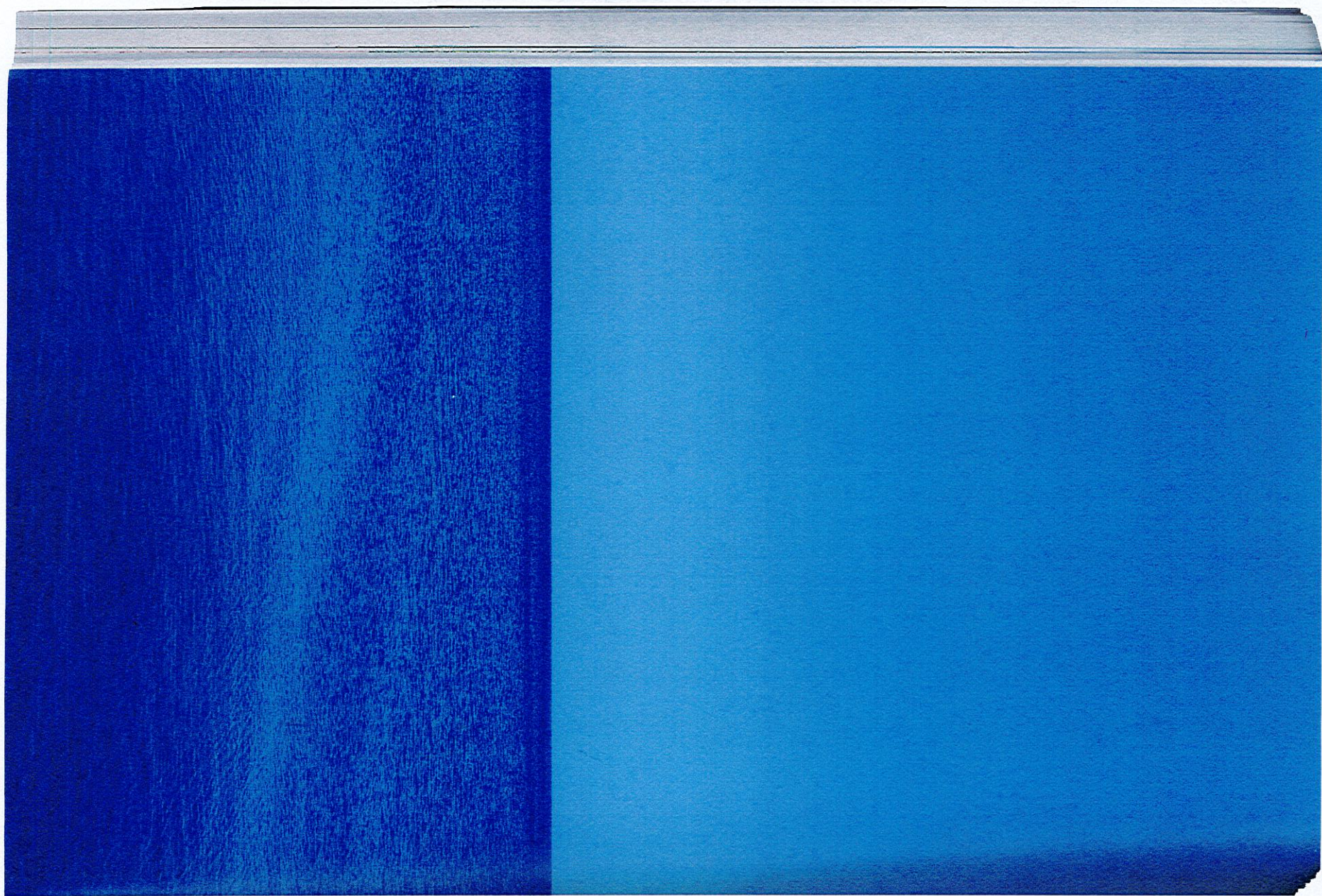
The air in my bedroom felt heavy with the blue of forgetting, and so I willed myself to think again of all that water, of the expanding rings of frigid air, and I wondered for the first time what it really means to live inside the bodies of your ancestors—to step from one world into another—as I once had, I realized, living inside of my own mother, floating and flipping and as alien as a snake.

And then I tried a very strange thing—not quite a ritual, but to a young girl something close to an incantation. I tried to un-become my individual self, to melt, liquid or dust, into that long-gone sky and distant sea that was The Point so many centuries ago. And although George probably wouldn't have had a chance to stand on that shore to see that amazing view, I wondered what he would have made of it.

Would he have seen all that water and sky as a possible escape, hoping to jump in and swim until he just couldn't swim anymore?

Or would it have looked to him like just another form of imprisonment—an impossible distance.





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# **SlackWater**

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